

ON RECORDS OF BIRDS¹

by Dorothy R. Arvidson, Arlington

Ruth Emery, who completes in March 1984 her fortieth year of service to Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS) and whose name is practically synonymous with records, began this record-keeping task in 1945 when Ludlow Griscom persuaded MAS to take over this responsibility from the Boston Society of Natural History. The two organizations were neighbors on Newbury Street in Boston, and Griscom was a member of both boards of directors. At that time, the records consisted of files of letters and lists contributed by active and interested birdwatchers. From this material, a newsletter summary of bird sightings was prepared at intervals and distributed to a number of subscribers. When this substantial "pile" of material was brought to Russ Mason's office (he was then the president of MAS), it was passed from desk to desk until Ruth volunteered, "I'll take care of that." And so she did, and to this day, still does.

Ruth organized the system, still in use today, of collecting reports and filing and storing all the information on record slips, one for each sighting reported, filed under the species name in the current A.O.U. order, and organized by month. This four hundred and eighty months of bird sightings is now a mountain of information that has been carefully accumulated and meticulously maintained and represents devotion to birdwatching of the highest order. Every birder, every field ornithologist, in fact, everyone interested in Massachusetts birds is heavily in debt to this remarkable woman. She still functions at the age of eighty-five as record-keeper, writing a monthly summary for MAS published as part of the Birder's Kit, supplying material for the Voice of Audubon, and organizing the records that Bird Observer's compilers draw upon for publication.

From 1945 to 1967, information on bird records in the state was published in Records of New England Birds with the following basic aims set forth in the first volume.

1. To provide data for the study of the average activities of all species, with special attention to distribution, population, and migration, and trends within these categories.
2. To record unusual occurrences, whether of rare forms or of common ones at extreme or unprecedented dates.
3. To assemble a reference file for observers which will indicate where and when birds are to be looked for.

Bird Observer now publishes in each issue two one-month compilations of bird species identified within the ten-county

¹Part of the material presented here has been taken from an article that appeared in BOEM in 1977 [5(1): 9] and was signed "by The Staff." All modifications of the original material are the responsibility of the present editor.

area shown on the frontispiece, and this is a major function of the magazine. Obvious limitations of space prevent the publication of the complete records, and the records committee of BOEM must decide which reports are most noteworthy. Another factor is time. All reports are kept on file, but only those which are sent in to Ruth Emery promptly will be available to the compilers for inclusion in the published records. Unfortunately, the omission of certain of these records has been in the past a cause of hard feelings, and it might be helpful, therefore, to make certain points plain.

Most of our readers and reporters are amateurs for whom birding is a hobby, a sport, a source of pleasure. BOEM is directed primarily toward this audience. However, this magazine is also used as a reference for record data. To accept a misidentification and to reject a correct identification are both compiling errors, but they are not of equal seriousness. Compilers generally agree that the former is the more unfortunate error. It is inevitable therefore that what may be perfectly valid sightings will occasionally not be printed, and the observer need draw no personal inference from this. Rejection of a record usually means simply that the submitted evidence has failed to convince the compilers of the correctness of the identification.

The integrity of the reporter is assumed; his expertise is not. None of us is fully familiar with every species that may appear within our area. Moreover, atypical or freak individuals are not uncommon within the avian world, and even the professional ornithologist is necessarily inexperienced with respect to aberrations of this sort. Furthermore, even the most competent and experienced observers do make mistakes. Unusual wind conditions or lighting effects often drastically change the appearance of a bird and lead to misidentification. Experienced field ornithologists are quick to admit this possibility and we should all follow their example.

Certain minimal data are needed for all reports, and the following basic information should be included: (1) species name; (2) date and place of observation; (3) an accurate count or careful estimate; (4) sex, if determinable; (5) immature or adult plumage; (6) vocalizations, if any; and (7) observers.

Which reports are most noteworthy? The compilers are interested in reports of the following: (1) early and late dates for migratory species; (2) maximum counts for migrants; (3) unusually high or low numbers of the more common species; (4) species outside their normal ranges, especially when such records may point to breeding range extensions; (5) species not on the current MAS checklist. The very active birder may know from his own experience and records which reports are of greatest interest. The less experienced observer will need help in determining which reports to submit. What is an early date for Red-eyed Vireos? What is an unusually high count or

an unusual range for a particular species? There are several books and pamphlets detailing such information: L. Griscom and D. Snyder, The Birds of Massachusetts, 1955; W. Bailey, Birds in Massachusetts, Where and When to Find Them, 1955, and Birds of the Cape Cod National Seashore, 1968 (and its supplement, 1970); N. Hill, The Birds of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, 1965. Some of these are out of print, but the 1983 Massachusetts Bird List, Fauna of Massachusetts Series No. 1, compiled by Brad Blodgett, is available from the state for \$1.00. Also, sometime within the next fifteen months, a new volume on the birds of this state, authored by Richard Veit and Richard A. Forster, will appear. Other sources of information about records are Records of New England Birds (1945-1967), BOEM (1973-present), and the regional reports in American Birds.

Reports of "difficult" species. Some of the birds on the MAS checklist as well as a number of vagrants are difficult to distinguish. Among these are the following species:

Arctic Loon	Baird's Sandpiper
Cory's vs. Greater Shearwater	Female Ruff or reeve
Leach's vs. Wilson's Storm-Petrel	Short-billed vs. Long-billed
Cormorants out of breeding season	Dowitcher
Immatures of Little Blue Heron	Red Phalarope vs. Red-necked
vs. Snowy Egret	Phalarope (basic plumage)
Immatures of Yellow-crowned and	All jaegers
Black-crowned night-herons	Common Black-headed Gull vs.
Female and eclipse plumage Blue-	Bonaparte's Gull
winged and Green-winged teal	Lesser Black-backed Gull
Females of Eurasian vs. American	Glaucous vs. Iceland Gull
Wigeon	Royal and Caspian terns
Greater vs. Lesser Scaup	Large alcids
Females or immatures of	<u>Empidonax</u> flycatchers
King Eider	Fish Crow (except by voice)
Females of Barrow's and Common	<u>Catharus</u> thrushes
goldeneye	Northern vs. Loggerhead Shrike
Females of Common vs.	Philadelphia vs. Warbling Vireo
Red-breasted Merganser	Orange-crowned Warbler
Golden vs. Bald Eagle	Immatures of Cape May, Pine, Black-
Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's	poll, and Bay-breasted warblers
Hawk, and Merlin	Northern and Louisiana
Immatures of Broad-winged vs.	waterthrushes
Red-shouldered Hawk	<u>Oporornis</u> warblers
King Rail vs. Clapper Rail	Clay-colored vs. Chipping Sparrow
Black-bellied vs. Lesser Golden-	Sharp-tailed vs. Seaside Sparrow
Plover (basic plumage)	Lincoln's Sparrow
Western vs. Semipalmated Sandpiper	House Finch vs. Purple Finch

The birds on this list are here for various reasons: they may be true sibling-species or unrelated look-alikes. Some are secretive or skulkers allowing only brief or far from perfect viewing; some are frequently or repeatedly misidentified. Reports of these birds should include details of the diagnostic characteristics observed or heard that led to the identification. There are several papers that have appeared in BOEM as well as a number available from MAS (Field Problems 1-23)

on the field identification of many of these confusing birds.

Reports of rarities. Any report of a species not on the MAS Checklist requires documentation of a more extensive nature. The additional information submitted should include the following material.

1. The exact location and specific local habitat.
2. The time of day and the duration of the observation.
3. Weather conditions during the observation and in the preceding hours and days, especially wind direction and speed.
4. Lighting conditions.
5. Optical equipment used and the distance from the bird.
6. Visual characteristics of the bird: size, shape, posture, and plumage.
7. Songs or other vocalizations.
8. Description of movements on the ground and in the air. Did it soar? Quality of the wingbeat and the flight.
9. Feeding habits. What was it eating and how was the food obtained?
10. Social habits. What other species were present? Was there interaction? Interspecific hostility is often an excellent clue to identity.
11. Differential diagnosis. With which other species was a direct comparison made? Which other species were considered as possible identifications, and how was each eliminated? The superior field observer is often distinguished by his attention to this matter. Remember the maxim: a rare or unusual view of a common bird is more probable than a sighting of a rare or unusual bird.
12. Supporting evidence; e.g., notes or drawings made in the field at the time of the observation, tape-recordings, or photographs.
13. The names of all observers and a record of any disagreements about identification.

Written reports may not be published, but all are kept in the records file. They are thus available for serious ornithological research and for evaluation by the "Rare Bird" Records Committee. Try to keep this in mind when you write your report, and be as accurate, as conscientious, and as complete as you can. The reader in the year 2050 may need and will appreciate those details. As an example of a very fine report of a rare bird, the November Mew Gull sighting sent in by Blair Nikula and Peter J. Grant (author of Gulls: A Guide to Identification, 1982) is offered in this issue.

In the next issue, BOEM will present more discussion of bird records, in particular, how the "Rare Bird Committee" functions, the importance of bird records in Massachusetts and elsewhere, the future of record-keeping in the computer age, and the contribution that any conscientious birdwatcher can make whether experienced professional or serious amateur.

OBSERVATION OF A COMMON (MEW) GULL (Larus canus)

Date: 30 November, 1983
Observers: Peter J. Grant
Blair Nikula

Location: below the Race Pt.
Parking Lot, Provincetown, Mass.

Weather: Clear; 50 degrees; West wind at 15-30 Mph.

Details of observation: Grant first noted the bird as it flew in from the east, working along the edge of the beach. The bird passed directly in front of the observers at a distance of approx. 50 yards, in excellent light and continued slowly up the beach to the west until out of sight. Total viewing time was approx. 2 minutes. Optics were 20X and 30X telescopes and 8X and 10X binoculars.

Description of bird: A medium-sized, gray-mantled gull near the size of a Ring-billed Gull (Larus delawarensis). (Although there were several Ring-billed Gulls in the general area, none was close enough to permit an accurate size comparison.)

The tail, body, neck, and head were pure white, with some gray streaking on the head and hindneck, indicating winter plumage. The mantle was medium gray, nearly identical to the Ring-billed and Herring (Larus argentatus) gulls present (although, again, the lack of a close comparison prevented a precise determination of mantle color relative to the other species present). The primaries were black, narrowly tipped with white. The outermost 2 primaries had large white spots, more extensive than those present on a typical Ring-billed Gull. The bill was completely yellow, and lacked any markings. The eye color was not discernible, nor was the leg color.

Identification was based on the clear yellow bill and primary pattern. Grant thought that the bird was of the nominate European race (L. canus canus) based on the primary pattern.

Both observers have previous experience with L. canus. Grant has extensive experience with the species in Europe and has authored papers and a book detailing the identification of the species.



Common Gull!
Race Point

PJG